

Sri Narayana Guru: A short biography

by

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Preface and Acknowledgements

Sri Narayana Guru’s contributions as a tireless reformer, a savant and scholar, and a profound humanist are each worthy of several volumes of analysis and study. This brief introduction to his life and times is, of necessity, superficial.

We have depended greatly on the following sources: the late Dr. K. Sreenivasan’s pioneering biography of the Guru in English, a short biography for the “Mahatcharitamala” series of the Childrens’ Book Trust by Sri K. Ramachandran, and the article “The Guru’s Life” by Sri T. N. Jayachandran in the volume “Sri Narayana Yuga Prabhavam” brought out by the International Sri Narayana Year Celebration Committee, Varkala.

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We dedicate this book to the memory of Dr. K. Sreenivasan, beloved husband to one of us and loving father to the other.

Prof J. Indira and Rajeev Srinivasan

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Introduction

Once upon a time, not so long ago, Swami Vivekananda came to Kerala. He was so outraged by the overt discrimination that he saw there that he declared that the place was a lunatic asylum. He was incensed by the extraordinarily cruel practices that were imposed on so called 'lower caste' people.

Obviously, temples were out of bounds to them. So were public wells. The 'upper castes' eating together with them was clearly out of the question.

'Lower caste' people were not allowed to cover the upper parts of their bodies: so women had to go bare-breasted, and were prohibited from wearing jewelry. They had to use extremely self-abasing language to refer to themselves, and at the same time had to use fulsome praise in referring to the 'upper castes': thus reinforcing with every word the gulf between themselves and their masters, and thereby their own unworthiness.

There existed not only untouchability; there was unshadowability – that is, a 'lower caste' person's very shadow would pollute an 'upper caste' person, so there were well defined distances – 5 feet, 30 feet – beyond which members of different castes had to stand.

Unbelievably, there was even 'unseeability'. At least one caste of lowly hunters was considered so inauspicious that the very sight of them would cause people to be polluted. These unfortunates had to shout, "I am coming this way, please look away, my masters!" to avoid being seen.

Incidentally, the punishment for pollution – even if inadvertent – was generally the death of the lower caste person.

Yes, it is hard to believe that we had such inhumanity in our midst. What was all the more startling was that all these pollution laws only applied to Hindus. Any lower caste person only had to convert to Christianity and Islam, and immediately they escaped the worst of the discrimination. There were many roads along which 'lower caste' Hindus were not allowed to pass, but Christians and Muslims could use them. It is therefore astonishing that there are any 'lower caste' Hindus left in Kerala. But there are, they still form the majority of the Hindu population there as they do everywhere else.

Today, a bare one hundred years later, it is truly unbelievable that this was what Kerala – or to be more precise, the princely states of Travancore and Cochin – were like at one time, within living memory. Today Kerala is a model of egalitarianism, perhaps the only place in India where overt casteism and discrimination are completely absent. A mass movement forced the Maharaja of Travancore to make an epoch-making "Temple Entry Proclamation" on November 12, 1936, throwing open all temples to all Hindus.

What had changed was the mindset of the masses. They realized the evils of casteism. This metamorphosis required a true revolution. And this revolution was inspired and catalyzed by a most unlikely revolutionary: an orthodox Saivite vedantin, a practicing

ascetic and monk who composed innumerable devotional songs in Sanskrit, Tamil and Malayalam. That great revolutionary was Sri Narayana Guru.

When one talks about the Guru, one is forced to use superlatives, and to compare him with a galaxy of notables. The greatest Hindu reformer to come out to Southern India since the incomparable Adi Sankara. The greatest and most successful champion of the rights of oppressed Hindus in the twentieth century, more successful than the much better known Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. Ambedkar.

The one who overturned the entire social system of Kerala, but without creating severe animosities and reverse oppression like EV Ramaswamy Naicker did in Tamil Nadu. The radical reformer whose clarion call of self reliance and self improvement strikes a chord in the oppressed anywhere in the world. The man whose ideals inspired the great Malayalam poet Kumaran Asan's clarion call:

*mattuvinnu chittangale! allenkil mattum
athukalee ningalethan!*

*Reform, change the rules! Else those very
Rules will be your downfall!*

As in the elegiac poem by Thomas Gray, the tremendous waste of human potential and ability was a crime against humanity; it was an intolerable sin against Mother India that a large segment of the population was not allowed to be the best they could be.

*Full many a gem of purest ray serene
The dark unfathom'd caves of ocean bear;
Full many a flower is born to blush unseen
And waste its sweetness on the desert air.*

There are also similarities with the struggles of blacks in the US, led by Dr. Martin Luther King. Just before he was assassinated, Dr. King led a civil rights related strike in Memphis, Tennessee, in 1968, when the protesters carried a banner with just the simple but striking statement: "I am a man", a human being. The Guru brought to the oppressed of Kerala the same realization: that they were human beings, worthy of respect and consideration.

The fact that today, in Kerala, there is an assertive egalitarianism, is primarily attributable to the spiritual and intellectual revival that the Guru brought to a moribund and decadent society. The fact that this happened in Kerala offers us considerable hope that similar, benign, revolutions can take place in other parts of India which are currently as benighted as Kerala was a hundred years ago: say, the badlands of the Indo Gangetic plain.

And the fact that Sri Narayana Guru was able to do this entirely within the framework of Hinduism is truly remarkable. One of Hinduism's greatest strengths has always been its capacity for renewal, renaissance, reform: and in this instance, the power of the

personality of one great saint was enough to cleanse Kerala's Hinduism of the accumulated dross of perhaps a millennium.

This has its own great lesson for India: the ancient civilization of our nation, the oldest and greatest of all civilizations, perhaps the only one that has survived more or less intact the attacks of determined outsiders, is indeed sanatana, eternal. Whenever the civilization is under great stress, individuals arise who, by the power of their personalities, are able to revitalize society and renew it.

It is remarkable that Hinduism, alone amongst the world's currently numerically dominant religions, is susceptible to reform. It **can** be reformed, and indeed it may **need** to be reformed periodically. It is astonishing that in historical times, every 1200 years or so, with amazing regularity, Hinduism has indeed reformed itself. Extrapolating from the past, it is now time for yet another Golden Age for the sanatana dharma, after it has been cleansed of a millennium's excrescences.

In the Bhagavad Gita, the Lord promises to return when ignorance and evil run riot:

*Yada yadahi dharmasya glanirbhavati bharata
Abhyuthanam adharmasya tadatmanam srujam yaham
Paritranaya sadhunam vinasaya cha dushkrtam
Dharma samsthapanardhaya sambhavami yuge yuge*

When the sanatana dharma became decadent 2500 years ago, the divine personalities of the Buddha and Mahavira appeared. Their Reformation attacked and corrected the practices that had accumulated in the dharma over time, returning it to its roots.

But heresies too decay. Twelve hundred years later, when the dharma needed a Counter-Reformation, there appeared divinely inspired personages such as Adi Sankara, Manikkavachakar, Tirujnana Sambandhar, Avvaiyyar, Jayadeva and Meerabai, whose intellect and devotion helped Hinduism rejuvenate itself.

Similarly, yet another twelve hundred years later, a glittering galaxy of great sages appeared: Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Dayananda Saraswati, Ramana Maharshi, Sri Ramakrishna, Swami Vivekananda, Sri Aurobindo, Babasaheb Ambedkar, Mohandas Gandhi, Sri Narayana Guru. Surely, there was an element of the Divine reincarnating Himself in defense of the sanatana dharma.

It is clear to historians too, and not only the devout, that mahapurushas appear from time to time. Says Arnold Toynbee in "A Study of History": individuals arise "who set going the process of growth in the societies to which they 'belong' ... They can work what to men seem miracles because they themselves are superhuman in a literal and no mere metaphorical sense."

Sri Narayana Guru was such a man of the ages, a yugapurusha. His words and actions are universal, and an inspiration to the oppressed anywhere in the world: and his singular

exhortation to them to gain self respect and to make themselves indubitably worthy of respect by others is a stroke of genius.

And the Guru's ability to create this benign revolution entirely within the framework of the sanatana dharma, without creating a dangerous dichotomy, is perhaps unparalleled in the history of religious reformers. Indeed, one might even say that the Guru was a subversive: for he showed the teeming masses, what in today's terms may be called the *bahujan*, that the dharma that they had been denied access to was in fact theirs. The priestly class had merely been entrusted with the faith in the name of the people. In an act of inspired subversion, he showed the masses how easily they could re appropriate the dharma: for it was always theirs, and theirs alone; it was not to be monopolized by anyone. For, the Creator of all of us surely belongs to all of us equally.

For his divinely inspired acts of subversion, it would not be inappropriate to call the Guru the greatest changer of the *status quo* in matters spiritual in India in a few centuries. What Mahatma Gandhi accomplished in the political sphere, Sri Narayana Guru accomplished in the spiritual sphere: they both made free men out of slaves.

This is the aspect of the Guru that will be covered in detail in the rest of this short introduction to his life. But it is also a fact that the Guru was a great religious scholar and writer, a commentator on the dharma on par with Swami Vivekananda and Sri Aurobindo.

In essence, though, the Guru's message was very simple:

*vidya kondu prabuddhar avuka
sanghatana kondu shaktar avuka
prayatnam kondu sampannar avuka*

*become enlightened, through education
become strengthened, through organization
become prosperous, through hard work*

The Guru's message resonated with other great souls who were part of the spiritual and intellectual renaissance a hundred years ago. Here is what Rabindranath Tagore recorded after his visit to Sivagiri: "I have been touring different parts of the world... During these travels, I have had the good fortune to come into contact with several saints and maharshis. But I have frankly to admit that I have never come across one who is spiritually greater than Swami Sri Narayana Guru of Kerala – nay, a person who is on par with him in spiritual attainments. I am sure I shall never forget that radiant face, illumined by the self-effulgent light of divine glory and those yogic eyes fixing their gaze on a remote point on a far-away horizon."

Mahatma Gandhi was similarly impressed, even though the Guru may have been a little underwhelmed by the Mahatma's ambivalent support for the Vaikom Satyagraha. Furthermore, upon meeting the Guru, the Mahatma asked, perhaps a little superciliously,

“Does the Guru speak English?” The Guru replied with characteristic understated wit, “No, but does the Mahatma speak Sanskrit?” Which of course the Mahatma did not.

The meeting must have had a major impact on Gandhi’s views on the issue of caste, for thereafter he redoubled his efforts to remove casteism. He was delighted to see ‘low caste’ children being trained to be priests at Sivagiri. He wrote in the guest book: “I consider it the greatest good fortune of my life to have visited the beautiful Travancore State and met the most venerable saint, Sri Narayana Guru Swami trippadangal.”

For unclear reasons, the Guru’s extraordinary achievements have not received their full due outside Kerala. One can only hope that over time, the life and times of this extraordinary humanist, reformer, and saint, become more accessible to the general public. For he was one of the greatest sons of India, in the lineage of the Buddha and Adi Sankara.

History, Caste and Demographics in Kerala

Kerala is a remarkable place by any standards, for it stands out so distinctly from the rest of India. The landscape is different, the customs are different, the very rhythms of life appear different. Indeed, it appears as though Kerala were an afterthought somehow attached to peninsular India. This last may not be a flight of fancy. According to legend, the sage Parasurama, in atonement of his sin of killing kshatriyas, created Kerala by throwing his axe out to sea, whereupon the sea withdrew.

The geological reality of this legend is that a major tectonic movement, perhaps an underwater earthquake, raised up this thin sliver of land from the sea. Atop the highest peaks of the Western Ghats, such as Anamudi, scientists have discovered fossilized sea bottom dwelling creatures like crustaceans. And it is clear that Kerala does suffer from periodic, massive earthquakes. One such, roughly 500 years ago, caused the decline of the great port of Muziris or Kodungalloor and created the deep water part of Cochin, when the river Periyar shifted its course from Muziris south to Cochin.

Kerala has always pursued its own path, somewhat different from the rest of India. This is a function of geography, for Kerala is physically cut off from even its closest relative, Tamil Nadu. Because of the high mountains that run down its spine, the Western Ghats, Kerala has generally been insulated from what happened on the Peninsula to the east and what happened in the Deccan plateau to the north. Thus, even though Kerala was generally part of the Chola-Pandya-Chera empires of the deep South, and even though Malayalam is essentially old Tamil with a lot of Sanskrit included in it, the state evolved a distinct identity of its own.

In many ways, Kerala has also looked to the sea, trading with the Romans and Phoenicians even: its black gold, the scarce and expensive spice, Tellicherry pepper, was the despair of the Roman Pliny the Younger who complained that his imperial treasury was being emptied by the demand for this and other luxury goods from India. Arabs and Malayali sailors discovered long ago how to use monsoon winds to cross the Indian Ocean and the Arabian Sea to reach Kerala. And Malayali shipbuilders made some of the

finest ocean going *urus* or sailing ships (as they still do around Beypore in northern Kerala) from abundant local teak.

A British poet wrote about the port of Ophir, which is believed to be Poovar near Trivandrum. It shows the antiquity of the trade links between West Asia and Kerala. Historically, the great port of Muziris (Kodungalloor), the Roman pronunciation of ‘muchira’, land of three streams, was the biggest harbor on the West Coast, along with Bharuchha or Broach in Gujarat.

*Quinquereme of Nineveh, from distant Ophir
Rowing home to haven in sunny Palestine
With a cargo of ivory
And apes and peacocks
Sandalwood, cedarwood and sweet white wine.*

Sea borne trade also gave Kerala a certain cosmopolitanism: for Jews fleeing Romans arrived in 72 CE; Syrian Christians under the merchant Thomas of Canaa, fleeing persecution, arrived around 400 CE; and Arabs, at that time newly converted to Islam, brought their religion circa 700 CE. For all three religions, this was their first arrival in India.

There are also interesting traditions which may be mythical. Some Christians claim that their Saint Thomas came to Kerala in 52 CE, but this is acknowledged in scholarly circles to be a later missionary fabrication, conflating Thomas of Canaa with Saint Thomas. Some Muslims claim that the then ruler of northern Kerala, Cheraman Perumal, converted to Islam, abdicated, and went to Mecca: there is little convincing proof for this, either.

Nevertheless, it is clear that small populations of people of Semitic religions existed in Kerala for very long without strife or conflict. This is a tribute to the inherent fairness and tolerance of Kerala’s Hindus.

There is considerable evidence that Kerala was mostly Buddhist and Jain. Periodically, farmers plowing their fields bring up old images of the Buddha, and you can find them here and there in Kerala: they are called *karumadi kuttans*, because they are made of black granite: one of these has been installed in a Burmese-style pagoda in Alappuzha. But Buddhism and Jainism (which was concentrated in areas close to Karnataka) both disappeared completely in pre historic times. Up to roughly 500 CE, there is evidence of a strong Buddhist presence.

For instance, there is the revered monk Bodhidharma from Kodungalloor, the originator of the Zen school of Buddhism. Bodhidharma is honored to this day as Daruma, the preceptor, in Japan, and immortalized in the Zen koan “Why did Bodhidharma go to the East?”. There is documentary evidence that Bodhidharma went to the Shaolin monastery in China around 400 CE, and that he took with him from Kerala the principles of *kalari*

payat and ayurveda, including the science of pressure points. These evolved later into the martial arts of East Asia as well as acupuncture and acupressure.

The great temple at Sabarimala was at least partly a Buddhist shrine: it was visited by, among others, the Chinese traveler Zhi'en Xang, who described it as a place of worship by both Saivites and by Buddhists, the former worshipping Siva and the latter worshipping the Avalokiteswara Padmapani, the Bodhisattva of Compassion. In fact, the connections with Tibetan Buddhism are striking: the Dalai Lama is considered an incarnation of the Avalokiteswara Padmapani, and his abode in Lhasa is the Potala Palace, apparently named after Sabarimala, which was called “potala” (bright light) in old Tamil!

The temple of Kannaki at Kodungalloor was, similarly, almost certainly a Buddhist nunnery. There is other circumstantial evidence of the prevalence of Buddhism in Kerala.

But Buddhism and Jainism declined and disappeared in Kerala, and this is not incidental to the story of the Guru. The most widely accepted explanation for the eclipse of Buddhism and Jainism is as follows: at some point, perhaps around 600 CE, a Hindu resurgence began, when Sanskrit speaking Hindu Brahmins established their sway in Kerala. The very word nambuthiri for Malayali Brahmins has been parsed as *nambu* + *thero*, where *nambu* is old Tamil for new, and *thero*, whence *teravada*, is the word for Buddhist priest.

Those Buddhists who collaborated with the Hindu takeover, goes this theory, were “promoted” in caste so that, while still sudras, they were deemed “high sudras”. The others, the masses, were considered “low sudras”. It is certainly a peculiarity of Kerala that there are practically no kshatriyas or vaishyas: there are Brahmin Nambuthiris, but the rest of Kerala’s Hindus are all sudras or outside the caste system.

This theory finds support in the legend of Mahabali and Vamana. Mahabali, the “asura” king, presided over an emphatically egalitarian system: in the old Onam song that celebrates this Golden Age:

*maveli vaneedum kalam
manushar ellarum onnu polay*

*when Mahabali ruled
we were all as one.*

But when the Brahmin Vamana asked Mahabali the “asura” (surely, the “asura” designation is because Mahabali was a Buddhist) for a boon he could not give him, he was banished to the netherworlds. Metaphorically speaking, the Brahmins defeated the Buddhists and took over.

There was a unique system of morganatic marriage or *sambandham* whereby Nambuthiris took spouses from among the sudra castes, but the offspring were considered sudras. Only the first born son among the patrilineal Nambuthiris was allowed

to marry a Nambuthiri woman, thus preserving genetic purity. Younger sons were forced to go for morganatic marriages.

The *bahujan* or the peasant class who were thus converted to “low sudras” became, in due course, the Ezhavas and Nadars of southern Kerala and southern Tamil Nadu, and the Thiyyas of northern Kerala. Then as now they form the largest group of Hindus in Kerala, despite large-scale conversion to Christianity.

Sri Narayana Guru was born into an Ezhava family, and hence the social and economic position of Ezhavas is central to his story. Unfortunately, despite the decidedly universal nature of his preaching, there is a tendency among in some quarters to see him as merely an “Ezhava guru”. This would have amused the Guru, for he certainly had a sense of humor: he once caused great consternation amongst the orthodox by gently suggesting that he had merely consecrated an “Ezhava Siva”. The very idea is absurd, as though the Infinite, the Creator himself, could be categorized into a small, watertight compartment!

Anyway, after the decline of Buddhism and Jainism from Kerala, which must have been completed during the Bhakti era, the social structure of Kerala was affected more by external events, including invasions and colonization.

After the fall of the imperial Tamil dynasties in medieval times, Kerala was under the sway of a number of small kingdoms, many of which were no more than regional satrapies or fiefdoms. The chief of these were the kingdoms that approximate the three regions of Kerala today: Vanchinad in the south, Cochin in the center, and the realm of the Zamorin in the north. Modern Kerala consists of Travancore (minus Kanyakumari district, ceded to Tamil Nadu), Cochin, and Malabar.

There was a tradition of martial valor, exemplified by kalari payat and Thiyya warriors, male and female (Aromal Chekavar and Unniarcha) and Nairs (Thacholi Othena Kurup) celebrated in the wonderful *vadakkan pattukal* (Northern Ballads).

Much like medieval samurai warriors in Japan, these brave kalari payat experts were honored mercenaries for the kings. They participated in remarkable rituals of martial valor: for example the *chaver* suicide squads, a handful of highly trained kalari payat experts who would fight the entire army of the Zamorin, unmindful of certain death. On occasion they almost succeeded in killing the king.

Roughly three hundred years ago, things began to consolidate. Under the warrior king Marthanda Varma, Travancore became a relatively powerful kingdom, extending from Kanyakumari to the vicinity of Cochin. One of his notable feats was his defeat in 1741 of a Dutch fleet at Colachel near Kanyakumari. This was significant, because the Dutch were never again a colonial threat to India after that.

But the other colonials did not go away. Portuguese, French and British invaders, who initially came for trade, soon started influencing the local kingdoms and societies greatly. The Portuguese in particular, fired up by their Inquisition-era spirit of aggressive Catholic

evangelism, wreaked havoc in Kerala, although to a lesser extent than in Goa, further up the west coast. The Portuguese were astonished to find Syrian Christians in Kerala who did not owe allegiance to the Pope. They proceeded to convert them, as well as Hindu fisherfolk, often by force.

The other colonial powers established alliances with the various kingdoms, with the intent of capturing the lucrative trade in spices and other commodities from Kerala. A series of forts along the Arabian Sea coast testifies to their presence.

The next major event was the invasion of Tipu Sultan of Mysore. Tipu, despite a reputation in some circles as a freedom fighter, was clearly fired up by the spirit of *jihad*. Tipu's march through northern Kerala carried in its wake large-scale forced conversions to Islam. To this day, the northern districts are heavily Muslim, with at least one district being Muslim-majority, and this is attributable to Tipu's march, which, in the racial memory of Kerala Hindus, is still remembered as a terrible catastrophe.

After the British defeated Tipu Sultan, his realm came directly under their rule. Thus what is Malabar today became part of the Madras Presidency. The states of Travancore and Cochin also came under the heavy influence of the British, who stationed 'Residents' to advise the kings, and on occasion, to browbeat them. Though nominally independent, Travancore and Cochin were under the British thumb.

A major part of the agenda of the British (at least some of them) was the Christianization of India. A certain Col. Munro who as the Resident in Travancore certainly had this objective. Therefore, in 1819, he influenced the then ruler of Travancore to donate Rs. 10,000 for the establishment of a Syrian Christian seminary at Kottayam. In today's terms, this was an extraordinarily large sum of money, amounting to about \$300 million.

As a result of the establishment of this seminary and of a number of Christian sects, for example the Church of South India, which became particularly strong in what is now southern Tamil Nadu, large-scale conversions to Christianity began. A major carrot was the fact that the Christians would offer education to anyone who converted: not unreasonably, large numbers of Hindus, especially those who belonged to the 'lower-castes', converted, expecting to improve themselves through education.

Numbers from the Travancore Manual reflect the demographic changes. In 1820, Travancore had 6% Muslims and 6% Christians. In one hundred years, Travancore had about 8% Muslims, and 33% Christians! Undoubtedly the dismal treatment handed out to the 'lower castes' played a large part in this massive conversion activity.

This was the society that Sri Narayana Guru was born into: one in which large numbers of his fellow-Hindus were oppressed, denied basic human rights and forced to accept at every turn the idea that they were inferior beings who deserved their status in life because of their sins in previous lives. Ezhavas who then accounted for some 20% of Kerala's population were seriously debating whether they should convert en masse to Christianity.

The life of the average Ezhava was horrendous, yet they were relatively privileged, as 'low sudras'. There were many wealthy land-owning Ezhava families, and many of the Sanskrit scholars and vaidyans in Kerala were Ezhava, in a way due to the truly bizarre reason that Nambuthiri vaidyans would lose caste if they touched anybody other than 'high-caste' patients. Whereas an Ezhava vaidyan could lay his hands on any patient: and he was temporarily 'promoted' to the caste of the patient. This is much like Japanese became 'honorary whites' in apartheid-era South Africa.

The truly oppressed Scheduled Castes, such as the Parayas and Pulayas, suffered far worse trauma. They were expected to work as agricultural laborers – in effect slave laborers – from dawn to dusk, and they were generally not paid in cash, but in rice or vegetables. Very few people from Ezhavas on down was allowed to hold a government job, which in those days was highly prestigious. Nor were they generally allowed to gain an education.

None of the 'low-caste' Hindus had access to temples. In a celebrated case that led to the famous Vaikom Satyagraha in 1924, Ezhavas and others demanded the right to merely walk on the streets surrounding the famous Siva Mahadeva temple at Vaikom; this was denied to them, but not to Muslims or Christians!

There were also many social ills among the 'low-castes'. Some of them practiced polyandry or polygamy. They often held elaborate and expensive ceremonies where they ended up feeding large numbers of people: the *thirandu kalyanam* to announce the menarche of their daughters; the *talikett* (a rather bizarre pseudo marriage where children were 'married' to each other, but that did not mean they were, or would have to be, married to each other when grown up); the *pulikudi* in which a pregnant woman was made to drink a concoction of seven sour things in her seventh month.

Of course, most of this was the product of superstition, the result of being uneducated: it flowed from the fact that they were oppressed and dispossessed people.

Perhaps the worst oppression, in retrospect, was that the 'low-castes' were banned from worshipping the great deities of Hinduism. Not even faith was allowed to them. They had quasi-temples, under a tree or on a roadside, where they worshipped not the Trinity or Sakti, but relatively primitive local deities – such as *madan*, *maruta*, *yakshi*, *chathan*, *muthappan*, and other frightening, autochthonic powers which were in a way distorted versions of Siva and Sakti. These powers were pacified with offerings of liquor and meat.

This, then, was the social environment into which Sri Narayana Guru was born. Clearly, the sattvic Hinduism of the Upanishads had deteriorated and been taken over by tamasic and rajasic forces. It fell to the Guru's lot to transform this appalling society into one where men were no longer slaves, but free men.

In some ways, the simplest thing for the Guru would have been to preach that Hinduism was hopeless, that the sanatana dharma had degenerated into something that was not at all

useful. This, of course, is the perspective of a lot of ‘intellectuals’ in India even today: they would throw the baby out with the bathwater.

It is to the great credit of the Guru that he realized that there was nothing wrong with Hinduism that a little moral force could not cure. One of sanatana dharma’s great virtues that it is able to reform itself. If you look at the example of Kerala, the reform in Hinduism took place rapidly, and has taken root.

Today, one would be hard-pressed to find in Kerala any one who believes he is inferior to anyone else in the world: poorer in circumstances, perhaps, but never less of a human being. Travelers frequently comment on how Kerala is the only place in India where nobody is obsequious: everyone treats a visitor on equal terms, as someone you might have an intellectual conversation with, not someone who is your superior. What a change from the extreme self-abasement of ‘low-caste’ Hindus a hundred years ago! They have acquired human dignity.

The simple, but revolutionary, message of the Guru – that you are human being, and that out of your own efforts you can improve yourself to a point where nobody can deny you what you deserve – holds equally true for the oppressed anywhere else in the world. This is what gives one hope that even in the most benighted, feudal parts of the country, it only takes one man and a simple message for the Indian to rise from slavery, to become a free man. And to do this, he does not have to denigrate the gods of his ancestors and become beholden to some ideology imported from the Middle East or China or America.

The Guru’s most significant message was: “one caste, one religion, one God for man” – and what he meant was not the oppressive monotheism of Semitic religions, but the pantheistic monism of Adi Sankara’s Advaita. All of us belong to one caste: the human caste; one religion: the religion of humanism; and we should worship one God, the Creator of all of us, who, after all, is no different from His Creation. The Guru believed that “it doesn’t matter what your religion is, you just have to better yourself.”

The Making of the Guru

The young Narayanan, also known as Nanu, was born to Madan Asan and Kochupennu/or is it Kuttியamma?, of Vayalvarath house, a middle class Ezhava family, at Chempazhanthi near Trivandrum on the 26th of August 1856 Common Era or chathayam nakshatram in Chingam (Leo), 1032 Malabar Era. Madan Asan was a farmer and Asan or village schoolmaster. Kochupennu was a housewife. They also had two other children, both girls. And Nanu’s uncle, Krishnan Vaidyar, was an ayurvedic physician of considerable repute.

The tiny three roomed hut where Nanu was born, with its walls of unbaked clay, floor of cowdung and its thatch of coconut leaves, is preserved as a monument. While to our modern eyes, it looks like a primitive hovel, by the standards of the day, it was a reasonably comfortable home. It reminds one of the humble log cabin where Abraham Lincoln was born.

As a young boy, Nanu was most notable for his piety (he was known for a while as “Nanu bhakta”) and his compassion towards others. He never failed to visit nearby temples; every day, he would take a ritual bath, visit the temple, pray, and adorn himself with sacred ash on his forehead and arms. Nevertheless, there was humor in his faith: there is a story of his stealing the fruits and other offerings to the deities from the puja room. On being challenged he suggested that if he, a little child, were happy, then God would be happy too.

Nanu also was fond of travel, frequently visiting his many relatives in various villages in the vicinity and spending a day or two with them. This may have been unconscious preparation for his later life as a wandering ascetic and monk, in the best traditions of Indian mystics and philosophers.

Early in life, Nanu showed his compassion to those less fortunate than himself: for instance, he mixed with the ‘outcaste’ Pulayas, sometimes sharing their food, to general consternation. On one memorable occasion, he was passing by a Pulaya hut, and noticed that their humble rice gruel was about to overflow the pot. Without a second thought, Nanu picked the pot off the fire. When chided by his father for this allegedly ‘polluting’ act, Nanu responded that if he hadn’t done what he had, that poor family would have starved that day: a statement of unassailable logic.

Nor was Nanu inclined to pay any regard to the so-called ‘high castes’ either. For, early in life, he realized that all humans are born with equal dignity and that the Creator’s grace does not discriminate amongst His creations.

As a youngster, Nanu once fell seriously ill with the smallpox. He spent the entire duration of 18 days at a Devi temple in Nedunganda, where he had gone to visit relatives. Without uttering a word to anyone, Nanu stayed alone at the temple, prayed and chanted, and sustained himself on alms. On the nineteenth day, cured, he went home. His astonished parents asked him who had healed him, the answer: “The Bhagavati did”. There is a connection between the Bhagavati and smallpox in village Kerala: the illness is thought to be controlled by her.

Nanu was a studious child. At the age of five, he was inducted into the world of writing by a local village officer, who incidentally was a descendant of the Ettuveetil Pillais, legendary foes of Marthanda Varma of Travancore. From his uncle, Nanu learned Sanskrit. On his own, he learned Tamil. He read the *Tolkappiyam*, *Chilappathikaram*, *Manimekhala*, and the *Tirukkural*, and became as fluent in old Tamil as though he were a native speaker.

At the instance of his uncle, young Nanu was sent to Puthuppally near Kayamkulam to study Sanskrit under a well known teacher, Raman Pillai Asan. From the age of twenty to twenty three, he studied with him, living with the aristocratic Ezhava family of Varanappallil, who were wealthy landed gentry. This was necessary because Raman Pillai, a Nair, could not have Ezhava students living with him even though he had a traditional gurukulam.

Young Nanu turned out to be an exceptional student. The Asan generally taught each of his students based on their capabilities. Even though the original intent had been to teach Nanu the *Raghuvamsam* and *Kumarasambhavam*, the Asan soon realized that his pupil was capable of more, so he taught him grammar, rhetoric and logic, as well as Vedanta.

After a few very pleasant years of rigorous study, Nanu realized that he needed to move on. A severe bout of dysentery laid him low, and that was the end of his formal education. He returned to Chempazhanthi, and took to being a teacher at neighborhood schools in Anjengo and Kadakkavoor. And he became known as “Nanu Asan” or teacher. His spiritual nature was beginning to come to the fore, and he wrote devotional poems to Lord Subrahmanya and Lord Siva. He spent much time with Jayadeva’s *Geeta Govinda*. He was preparing himself for the life of a yogi.

Nanu Asan’s parents were alarmed at this turn of events: they wished their son to be a householder. They arranged his marriage with one of his cousins. Indeed, according to custom, his sisters presented the bride with her wedding finery, and Nanu Asan was married.

However, marriage was not sufficient to hold the Guru from his chosen path of devotion and brahmacharya, celibacy. It is believed that the marriage was unconsummated, and that the Guru said to his wife, bidding farewell to her:

“Everyone is born into the world to fulfill their own destinies. You and I are destined to do different things. You should follow your own path, and I mine.”

Instead of the desired result, as in the case of the Buddha, marriage in fact hastened renunciation. Soon after, Nanu Asan left home for good to become a wandering ascetic, at the age of twenty-six.

Nanu Asan spent some time at the family home of an old classmate of his from the Varanappalli days, Perunellil Krishnan Vaidyar, a physician and scholar. There he met someone who was to become a close friend: the yogi Kunjan Pillai, later to become well-known as Chattampi Swamikal. The two were impressed by each other’s spirituality and knowledge. Contemporaries, they shared interests in Vedic texts, Saivism and the Tamil classics. Nanu Asan was also introduced to Kunjan Pillai’s guru, the *hatha yogi* and Subrahmanya-devotee, Thycaud Ayyavu.

After becoming adept at hatha yoga, a prelude to his later practice of raja yoga, Nanu Asan continued his wanderings around Southern Travancore, and indeed, much of Southern India. He was following in the footsteps of innumerable saints and seekers after the Truth of this ancient land, through solitude, austerities and meditation. He spent his nights outdoors under the canopy of the stars.

But his asceticism did not abhor contact with people; he would spend time in the home of a fisherman or an outcaste, visiting a Muslim or a Christian. He respected the Sufi

tradition in Islam, as well as for the religion's emphasis on a brotherhood of man. He was also attracted to Christian ideals of compassion as well as service to others. He considered the world his family, *vasudhaiva kudumbakam*.

It was during this time that "Nanu Asan" metamorphosed into "Nanu Swami". The simple villagers he encountered were awed by the spirituality and grace of this imposing figure. He also had considerable knowledge of medicinal plants and ayurveda from his family's traditions and from his uncle and from his study of Sanskrit works. Whenever he came across a villager whom he could heal, he would help him with ayurvedic remedies. Naturally, people began to ascribe various miracles to him, but as the Swami himself might have said, these were simply the result of his sympathetic and astute observation of the problems of the people who came to him.

Nanu Swami spent many months in a cave at the summit of Marutvamala in Kanyakumari District. He chose this wonderfully scenic location, with the ocean in the distance, and an unfettered view of the far horizon. He spent much time in the cave in yogic postures. When hungry, he would drink from a crystalline stream nearby. For food, he used his knowledge of local plants: some tubers and a plant whose juice would set, appam like, if you let it sit for a while, and it is both nutritious and tasty.

Some time during this period of intense sadhna, deep penance and meditation, he attained a Buddha-like Enlightenment; he became a self-realized soul. Here he achieved the kind of self knowledge that he later celebrated in his major work, *Atmopadesa satakam* (One Hundred Verses of Self Instruction).

As the Guru later wrote in his *Muni charya panchakam* (The Path of the Ascetic) after he visited Sri Ramana Maharshi at Tiruvannamalai, his meditation had allowed him to cut through the veil of maya and realize the nature of Truth:

*Let him live in his own home or in the forest
Or at the water's edge: no matter.
With mind ev'r in the Absolute fixed,
The yogi dwells seeing always in terms of selfhood.
Enjoys he bliss, that silent one,
Like mirage in desert land,
Contemplating that Absolute
Beyond compare.*

That point marked the transition from "Nanu Swami" to "Sri Narayana Guru Swami", for he was no longer merely an adept, an ascetic, a renunciant, an itinerant. He had gone beyond *jnana yoga*, and had reached the summit of *raja yoga*. Now it was time to bring his knowledge and experience to the masses, to begin the time of karma yoga. His long years of preparation and sadhna had made him a *jeevan mukta*: now, at the age of thirty one, he had an obligation to return to society and share with others the wisdom that had come to him on the summit of Marutvamala.

Consecration at Aruvippuram

Swami Vivekananda once said:

“We must prove the truth of pure Advaitism in practical life. Sankara left this Advaita philosophy in the hills and forests, while I have come to bring it out of these places and scatter it broadcast before the workaday world and society.”

And that is exactly what Sri Narayana Guru Swami also did. For, instead of being satisfied with esoteric and arcane philosophy, his vision was to translate his knowledge into action.

And the Guru did this with a flourish, with his act of divinely inspired revolt. The Guru, it must be remembered, had a genius for challenging the *status quo* tactfully: without fuss, without rancor, with a little humor, he was able to strike unerringly at the very root of the afflictions affecting the sanatana dharma. His non confrontational approach paid rich dividends.

For, what the Guru did, with all the wisdom of his mere thirty one years, was to take on hundreds of years of orthodoxy and belief, which had made sense to all parties concerned, both those who benefited from it and those who suffered from it. It had been deeply ingrained into the minds of everyone in Kerala that this is the way things had always been: only ‘upper castes’ were allowed to worship the great Trinity of Hinduism. Only Brahmins were allowed to consecrate temples.

Why was this? Nobody knew, and in fact, nobody would have had the wits to ask that question. It was the way things were done, there was no sense in overturning tradition.

Into this milieu came the Guru’s act of consecrating a Siva temple at Aruvippuram.

It is difficult for us modern people to comprehend the explosive force of the Guru’s act at Aruvippuram: it was metaphorically like dropping a nuclear bomb in the face of collective orthodoxy. This was similar to the act of the Buddha and Mahavira proposing their own heresies, that of Martin Luther in nailing his 95 Theses to a church door: it was a non violent revolution of the mind.

Aruvippuram is an extremely unlikely location to start a revolution: a small, quiet village on the banks of the Neyyar River, near Trivandrum. After Marutvamala, the Guru went to this charming, bucolic location. He found a cave to reside in, and a hilltop boulder where he could meditate, while enjoying the bounteous beauty of nature all around. Incidentally, the Guru had a particular talent for identifying locations of great natural beauty where he would set up his abodes: for example, Sivagiri at Varkala.

News spread far and wide about the arrival of the holy man, and the simple villagers began to arrive to have darshan of this sage and to ask for his advice. They also asked him to cure their sick. A combination of the Guru’s knowledge of ayurveda, his sympathetic attention, and their faith in him, would have helped cure a number of people.

Perhaps there was also the effect of mystical powers he had gained from rigorous penance.

In any case, the story of miracles wrought by the Guru started bringing large numbers of pilgrims to the site. Undoubtedly, the Guru would have been amused at the idea that he was creating miracles, but there was a very real danger that they would start worshipping him as God since there was no temple there. Besides, once a temple was established, it would become a focal point for sanctity, knowledge and wisdom. Therefore, the Guru realized that it was critical to build a temple at Aruvippuram.

Over the years, the Guru had become a Siva bhakta, although in his youth he had been successively a devotee of Subrahmanya and of Krishna. But by the time of his tapas at Marutvamala, his *ishta devata* or personal deity was none other than the Lord Siva, who as Pasupati or the Lord of the Animals graces the seals of the Indus Sarasvati Civilization, who as Dakshinamurthi is the giver of boons; He who as the Nataraja of Chidambaram dances the Universe into existence; and who as the terrible Kala Bhairava, Black Time, destroys his own creation.

The most complex and the most enigmatic of the deities of Hinduism, the celibate mendicant as well as the great lover, the rough dweller of cremation grounds as well as the elegant Ardhanariswara, Siva was the deity that the Guru wished to consecrate at Aruvippuram.

This ran into an immediate logistical problem: who would consecrate the image? As everybody knew, only Brahmins were allowed to do so. And which Brahmin would come to this jungle to do this?

The auspicious date and time for the consecration were chosen: midnight, on Sivaratri night in the month of Kumbham (Aquarius), 1063 ME or 1888 CE. A large boulder on the eastern bank was chosen as the pedestal for the consecrated image. The area around it was cleansed and festooned with garlands; traditional temple music was played. The Guru sat nearby, deep in meditation.

The organizers of the event began to get a little restive: where was the image? Who would consecrate it?

From Kumaran Asan's unfinished biography of the Guru, here is a quoted eyewitness account:

“At midnight, Swami took a dip in the river. He rose after a moment with something in his hands, a cylindrical stone in the shape of a sivalinga, and he walked into the makeshift temple. He stood there with his eyes closed in deep meditation, his hands holding the sivalinga to his chest, tears flowing down his cheeks, oblivious to the world. For a full three hours, he stood motionless, while the crowd rent the midnight air with the chant “Om Nama Sivayah”, “Om Nama Sivayaha”. They had only one impulse, one thought, one prayer, ‘Om Nama Sivayah!’”

This was a singular moment, a moment in which a man became as God, achieving union with Him, Siva, the One.

At three in the morning, the Guru placed the sivalinga on the pedestal, performing all the formalities of that sacred rite.

This was the first satyagraha, much before Mahatma Gandhi invented that word. The use of soul force and the strength of morality, without violence, to disobey an obviously unjust injunction, to overturn what any impartial observer could see was unfair, in a manner that would be hard for anyone to take exception with. There is an obvious parallel with the Mahatma's march to Dandi decades later, to take salt from the sea in violation of unjust British laws.

The significance of this consecration is hard to overstate. It was a silent, but courageous, assertion of the fact that the sanatana dharma belonged to everyone, not only to a priestly class, or those who had anointed themselves as 'upper castes'. It showed a determination by the *bahujan* to reappropriate, to reassert their rights to, what was really theirs. The dharma belonged to the masses; it had been given in trust to the Brahmins and kshatriyas so that they might protect and nurture it, not so that they might own it.

And clearly, the Brahmins and kshatriyas had failed to protect the dharma. Where was the Great Wall of India that the kshatriyas should have erected across the Khyber and Bolan passes that would have prevented barbarian after barbarian from streaming down into northern India, wreaking endless damage? Where were the kshatriyas when the barbarians burned down the great universities of Nalanda and Takshashila?

Where were the Brahmins when messengers of alien faiths descended upon the country, preying upon the faithful like wolves upon the fold? Why had they not led the intellectual renaissance that would have reawakened Mother India? Where was their response to the evils of casteism and the oppression of untold millions? Why did they not see that their lack of intellectual leadership had deprived Mother India of the talents of all those "full many a flower born to blush unseen", those potential Kalidasas and Aryabhatas and Paninis condemned to live out their lives in unlettered misery?

In other words, the kshatriyas and Brahmins had failed to discharge the sacred responsibility entrusted to them. The power given to them had corrupted them, and they had become selfish, self centered. Therefore it was necessary for the masses to take back the sanatana dharma from them. And, in summary, that was the message that the Guru broadcast with his simple act of great audacity: the masses, the *bahujan*, were taking the faith back from the failed custodians.

Throughout history, nobody who has power has relinquished it voluntarily. In Kerala too, the orthodox raised the question: "How could a non Brahmin consecrate an image?" To which, the Guru replied, with characteristic dryness, "I have only installed an Ezhava Siva."

That simple statement brings out a sublime paradox: how could Siva, the Infinite, the Creator, be 'merely' an 'Ezhava Siva'? Conversely, how could Siva, the Infinite, the Creator, be 'owned' by the Brahmins, so that they alone could interact with Him? And why exactly is a Brahmin's brahminhood determined solely by birth, and not by his actions, even if he were a criminal or a murderer? Why would a learned monk, purified by decades of penance and meditation, not have the right to do the consecration?

Obviously all of these concepts were questionable: and this is how the Guru exposed the absurdities that had overtaken Hinduism. In the harsh glare of true intellectual enquiry, it was clear that casteism had no basis to rest on, either in the Vedas or the Upanishads or in the Bhagavad Gita. The orthodox had no answer to the challenges thrown up good humoredly by the Guru. And orthodoxy never recovered from this blow to their cherished beliefs.

On the other hand, this was the signal act that rescued the sanatana dharma in Kerala. Otherwise, following trends hitherto, Kerala would have been completely converted to Christianity and Islam by now, a mirror image of Pakistan, Bangladesh and the converted Northeast. The Guru gave the downtrodden masses of Hindus a stake in the system, a reason to stay on in the faith, a glimmer of hope that they too would one day be treated as free men, equal to all others. They could dream of what the French Revolution had stood for, exactly 99 years before: liberty, equality and fraternity.

And it has to be said in all fairness that the Hindus of Kerala deserve credit for recognizing the truth behind this shock to their belief system. In a less gentle land, the Guru's heterodox behavior may have been greeted with the equivalent of Sri Rama's beheading of Shambuka, the sudra ascetic who dared to infringe upon the exclusive rights of the 'upper castes'. Despite the truth in Swami Vivekananda's statement that Kerala was a lunatic asylum at the time, it is apparent that the 'upper castes' in Kerala were open to reason and argument. This may have been a vestige of the times of the Buddhists and Adi Sankara, when debate settled philosophical differences. As a result of this enlightenment they proceeded when awakened to build a just society, much like the Europeans found that their enlightenment energized them after centuries of church tyranny.

It is of course true that every act has its own positives and negatives. In a way, it might be said that the radical egalitarianism of the Guru may have allowed the pernicious influence of Marxism to take hold in Kerala. For, a society that had absorbed the idea of castelessness was easily seduced by the siren song of classlessness as well. The sudden awareness of rights may have also led to the current state where rights are everything and responsibilities are nothing. This is a sorry state of affairs, which will soon right itself.

In passing, it may also be mentioned that the Ezhavas, who account for most of the peasantry, have been the backbone of the Marxists in Kerala. This is now beginning to change, as previously atheistic and agnostic, left wing, Ezhavas are finding that their younger generation at the turn of the century has become assertively and demonstratively

Hindu. A new consciousness of the remarkable teachings of the Guru has also risen among Ezhavas and Thiyyas.

In course of time, a temple was built at Aruvippuram, where the image had been installed. A monastery also came up nearby, and there celibate monks of all castes were trained in the yogic and philosophical practices needed for priesthood. For a while, the Guru himself lived in a small dwelling there.

Sri Narayana Guru Swami had the following stanza inscribed at the entrance to the temple:

*Jati bhedam mata dwesham
Etum illaathe sarvarum
Sodara twena vazhunna
Matrka sthanam aanithu*

Free of the prejudice of caste
And religion, everyone here
Lives like brothers
In this exemplary abode.

The Guru's message could not be clearer: *liberte, egalite, fraternite*. These simple words have inspired many an institution that strives towards the same ideals. It embodies in four lines the vision that the Guru had for an emancipated India or even the whole world: for his horizons were not constrained to the narrow confines of Kerala alone. When we can truly say that our land becomes "that exemplary abode" of brotherhood and solidarity, we would have finally accomplished what the Guru set out to do. That will be our Rama Rajya, our millennium, our City on the Hill.

Organization and the SNDP Yogam

After the temple at Aruvippuram was built, an unofficial committee came into existence to ensure its smooth functioning. Later, in 1074 ME or 1898 CE, it was registered as a society, which became the focal point of the social movement that had been launched by the quiet revolution that the Guru had instigated.

It is worth noting once again that the Guru's non confrontational approach, which concentrated not on frontal attacks but on flanking strategies, was a brilliant success. In contrast, the confrontational approach of E V Ramaswami Naicker and his Dravida Kazhagam in Tamil Nadu has left a bitter legacy of animosity, and it has not led to the kind of thoroughgoing reform that Kerala has seen.

Gradually, the temple committee at Aruvippuram started looking more broadly at the issue of sustaining the momentum behind the reform movement. Through it, the Guru began to tackle the other ills in Hindu society: for instance, he campaigned against the worship of fierce tribal deities; against the wasteful and expensive practices such as the

above mentioned talikettu, pilgrimages and other such. It was this temple committee that over time became the nucleus of the Sri Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam.

It was during this period, in 1891, that the Guru met one of his most illustrious disciples, one who was to become arguably the greatest poet in Malayalam ever, Kumaran Asan. At the time a callow 18 year old, Kumaran as was then known, came to visit the Guru and to ask his opinion about his poetry.

This meeting was as momentous as the initial meeting between Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa and Swami Vivekananda. The guru recognized in the young man his principal shishya, and they laid the foundations of a lifetime of achievement. After listening carefully to a couple of Kumaran's compositions, the Guru realized that this was a young man of phenomenal talent. The Guru said to him: "Kumaran is very talented. But.... do not write romantic poetry now. It's not good for you."

Kumaran took this advice to heart, and it changed his life completely. He became a vendantist and a yogi, and from the immaturity of youth he quickly turned into a mature poet and man of action: his later work, suffused with ideas from Buddhism and Vedanta, is justly praised as the pinnacle of Malayalam poetry. His master works such as *Veena Poovu* (an elegy on a fallen flower), *Nalini*, *Karuna*, *Duravasta*, *Chandala Bhikshuki*, etc. earned him the sobriquet of Mahakavi; among the trinity (Vallathol, Asan, and Ulloor) who dominated Malayalam poetry, he was the one with the greatest depth and substance.

After the initial meeting, the Guru sent Kumaran to Bangalore and Calcutta to continue his education, under the tutelage of Dr. Palpu. Kumaran Asan returned to Kerala in 1900, and thereafter was active in the service of the Guru for many years until his tragic death when a boat sank on the River Pallana.

The monk Satyavrata Swami, who was born as Ayyappan Pillai, a Nair, was another of the Guru's favorite disciples. He often remarked on Satyavrata Swami's dedication, his spirit of egalitarianism, his idealism, and his oratorical powers. He was the Guru's primary lieutenant in the spiritual realm. Later, he was to play a leading role at Vaikom, and he was the chief organizer of the All Religion Conference. His untimely death at the age of 33 was a major blow to the Guru.

Dr. Palpu was from many perspectives foremost among the disciples that the Guru gained during these early years. It would be fair to say that it was Dr. Palpu who was most responsible for turning the jnana of the Guru into the karma of organized activity. The SNDP Yogam itself was conceived largely by Dr. Palpu. As someone who had suffered greatly because of casteism, Dr. Palpu spent his life fighting against it.

Born in 1863 to a poor Ezhava family in Trivandrum, Dr. Palpu was denied admission to medical school in Travancore even though he stood first in the written examinations. This was on account of his caste: Ezhavas at the time were not allowed to study in government run schools and were prevented from holding government jobs with a salary greater than

five rupees per month. Undeterred, he took his medical degree from Madras and then practiced both in Madras Presidency and in Bangalore.

Dr. Palpu took extended leave of absence from his job and came to Travancore in 1896 with the express intention of organizing and improving the lot of his fellow Ezhavas. He toured all over Travancore, meeting and engaging with Ezhavas everywhere. He had already been a signatory to the “Malayali Memorial” of ME 1067, which demanded of the Maharaja of Travancore that he employ more Malayalis, as opposed to the Tamil Brahmins who were generally preferred for government jobs. However, that had not helped Ezhavas very much.

In the meantime, Dr. Palpu had met Swami Vivekananda, who had advised him, in his pithy manner, to seek a spiritual leader. He said: “If you want to speak of politics in India, you must speak through the language of religion.” This is a truism in India: the only way political and social ideas can make headway is if they engage the spiritual attention of the populace. Sri Aurobindo would have agreed, for he has said elsewhere: “All great awakenings in India, all her periods of mightiest and most varied vigor, have drawn their vitality from the fountainheads of some deep religious awakening. Whenever religious awakening has been complete and grand, the national energy it has created has been gigantic and puissant.”

Thus the stage was set for a meeting of minds between the Guru and Dr. Palpu: the former needed a man of the world to take his wisdom and enlightenment to the masses; and the latter needed a mystic whose authority would enable him to evangelize the message of self improvement.

Dr. Palpu visited the Guru a number of times at Aruvippuram. After a number of discussions, they decided to transform the Temple Committee into the Sri Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam, a joint stock company, in ME 1078 Edavam 2nd (CE 1903 May 15th). The Guru himself was nominated the President; Kumaran Asan the Secretary, and Dr. Palpu the Vice President. A newspaper named “Vivekodayam”, edited by Kumaran Asan, was the mouthpiece of the Yogam. Asan, back from Calcutta, was to serve as the Secretary of the Yogam for 16 years.

It is interesting that the Guru did not envisage the SNDP Yogam being a community organization for Ezhavas alone: for he was entirely catholic in outlook and had never recognized separation based on caste. However, in the event, the SNDP Yogam definitely took on an Ezhava flavor.

The establishment of the Yogam was instrumental in creating a new wave of optimism among the Ezhavas and Thiyyas. The Guru’s exhortation: “Become enlightened through education; become strong through organization” was exactly what the SNDP proceeded to follow. The Yogam became an inspiration for members of other castes to form their own community organizations: the Pulaya Mahasabha, the Nair Service Society and the Yogakshema Sabha of the Namboothiris are examples.

The SNDP Yogam had several important objectives: first, to administer and manage various temples and monasteries; second, to educate and uplift the downtrodden masses and improve their morality; third, to demand justice and fairness through the power of collective bargaining; and fourth, entirely practical but perhaps surprising coming from a yogi, was an emphasis on economic progress. Hence, “become wealthy through your own industriousness.” There is nothing wrong with accumulating wealth through fair means: indeed this is the dharma of the vaishya.

An example of the last objective was the industrial exhibition organized at Kollam as part of the second annual meeting of the Yogam. The exhibition highlighted the products made by the Ezhava and Thiyya community in Travancore, Cochin and Malabar. It was an impressive sight, and went a long way towards improving the self respect of the community. As always, economic might translated into justifiable pride in one’s own culture and community: as has happened in the last century with Japan, and is beginning to happen in India as a whole today after the unprecedented economic boom.

But the Yogam certainly did not ignore the other objectives. It set about building schools, and later colleges, where anybody could study. The Guru suggested the study of English, as he foresaw the coming demand for the language; he insisted that women be educated the same as males. As Dr. Palpu emphasized in the first annual meeting of the Yogam:

“A society or for that matter a group, makes durable progress and achieves prosperity only through education. In our community there should be none without at least primary education. For that one and all should specially strive. When you refer to an Ezhava male or female, it should imply that he or she is one who knows how to read and write.”

It was education not only in the traditional sense of the term, but also in the removal of excesses and ostentatious, wasteful ceremonies. For instance, the cessation of polyandry and polygamy and conversely the encouragement of widow remarriage; the ending of demeaning rituals like menarche announcement for girls; and the suggestion that a wedding ceremony should have no more than ten participants.

For social reasons, most people chose to ignore that last bit of advice, but an Ezhava wedding must now be the simplest in India. It takes a grand total of ten minutes, for the bride and groom to exchange rings and garlands, for the mangalasutra to be tied, and for a ritual circumambulation of the sacred fire. Included is a minute to sign their names in the Yogam’s register so that a valid marriage certificate may be issued.

As part of its social and political agenda of demanding and gaining for the community its fair share, the Yogam pursued the issue of representation in the Travancore Legislature. Ezhavas, 20% of the population, had not a single representative. In an echo of the American slogan, “No taxation without representation”, the SNDP Yogam managed to get Ezhavas into the legislature. Similarly, the Yogam fought for the right to government jobs, the right of admission for Ezhava children in government schools, and indeed, the right for Ezhavas to use public roads, which had hitherto been denied to them.

The last demand was what precipitated the famous Vaikom Satyagraha, led by firebrand SNDP Yogam leader T K Madhavan, who was also an organizational genius who helped create a hundred Yogam branches and enrolled thousands. With his journal “Deshabhimani” which later turned, mysteriously, into the house organ of the Marxists, Madhavan was a proponent of the Civil Rights Movement in Travancore.

It was the direct result of Madhavan’s work and the Vaikom Satyagraha that the Temple Entry Proclamation became a reality in 1936, although, it must be said, not before Madhavan had to threaten an *en masse* conversion of Ezhavas into Christians, which would instantly have turned Travancore into a Christian majority state. This was a rather alarming prospect for the Maharaja, and indeed for the ‘upper caste’ Hindus. This does not, however, detract from the grace and courage with which the Maharaja of Travancore, an enlightened and far-sighted ruler, approved Temple Entry. Sadly, Madhavan died in 1930, not living long enough to see the fruits of his labor.

It is also notable that the Yogam nurtured a number of brilliant individuals who were not necessarily interested in the spiritual or religious angle of the SNDP Yogam, but who were interested in its social and political work. For instance, the atheist and socialist ‘Sahodaran’ (Brother) Ayyappan, the journalist and publisher C V Kunjuraman, the lawyer and later Congress Chief Minister of Kerala C Kesavan, the lawyer C Krishnan who published the *Mitavadi* (The Moderate) and advocated conversion to Buddhism, and many others who were generally more impelled by nationalism than spirituality.

In the meantime, the Guru continued to advise the SNDP Yogam on all issues, but his prime concern was the original *raison d’être* of the temple committee: the establishment, maintenance and upkeep of temples. The Guru believed that the temple was the social and spiritual center of the community, and that it would serve as the focal point for educating and ennobling the masses. Therefore, he consecrated a series of temples, often making an emphatic statement with the images he chose.

Foremost among his temples is Sivagiri in Varkala. In 1902 he built a small retreat for himself atop the picturesque hill with its panoramic views out to the ocean, close to medicinal hot springs, and a stone’s throw away from the millennia old Janardhana Swami temple and the Papanasam beach. By 1912, he had completed the consecration of the Sarada temple at Sivagiri, dedicated to Sarasvati, the deity of learning.

It was a novel temple, one without any ritual: the only thing that a devotee would do there is to chant a mantra or meditate silently. In a way, this is reminiscent of the ancient shrine to the Supreme Brahman, the formless and Infinite, at Oachira near Kayamkulam. There too there is no shrine nor even a deity. Similarly, at the Advaita Ashrama at Aluva, on the banks of the Periyar, there is neither shrine or deity: there are only means to study and meditate on the Vedanta.

The Guru’s instructions about the temples he consecrated were simple. They would obviously be open to all Hindus; they would avoid unnecessary expenditures such as those for fireworks and festivals; they must all have schools, vegetable and herb gardens,

and industry attached to them. By industry, he meant any manufacture, even something as simple as the conversion of raw coconut kernels into value added products like lampshades and utensils. The point he made, foreshadowing Gandhi yet again, was that investment in small scale industry, handicrafts, etc. would provide substantial returns that would help the community improve itself economically.

As far as the Guru was concerned, the new temples of modern India would be... temples, only they had been reformed to keep up with the times. In this, the Guru was far more perceptive than the socialist Jawaharlal Nehru's laughable claim that India's new temples would be hydroelectric dams: it is hard to imagine anything less appealing for a spiritual people.

It is interesting that of the hundred odd temples that the Guru established, almost all of them have what one might consider the deities of formal Hinduism, not the autochthonic and fierce village deities that the Ezhavas at one time worshipped with tamasic offerings of alcohol and meat. Orthodox 'progressives' of today would tend to demean this with the term 'Sanskritization', implying that the village deities are somehow more authentic.

This is an absurd vanity, brought on by an extreme case of political correctness. The deities of 'high' Hinduism are the result of thousands of years of philosophical and spiritual evolution, and to suggest that Siva should be worshipped by the 'lower castes' only as a simple hunter rather than as the complex, many-layered Ardhanariswara, for instance, is deeply insulting to the 'lower castes'. It is as if they do not have the wits to understand the subtleties of the formal sanatana dharma. And it further perpetuates the false dichotomy that somehow formal Hinduism belongs only to the 'upper castes', and that 'lower castes' deserve only a distorted form. It is, in effect, a kind of bizarre racism.

The Guru suffered from no such confusion. He was clear that the deities of formal Hinduism belong to all Hindus. The innovations he made in his choice of images, however, are most interesting. At the Mahadeva temple at Murukkumpuzha, he installed a lamp made of *panchaloha*, five metals; the sacred syllable 'AUM' is inscribed thereon. At Kulavancode near Chertala, he installed a mirror, again with AUM inscribed on it: the obvious symbolism is that, as taught by Advaita, the Infinite is within yourself. Other major temples included the Jagannatha temple at Thalasseri and the Sri Kanteswara temple at Kozhikode.

It is also notable that the Guru never believed that religious conversion was the answer to the problems of his suffering masses. Some of his disciples were strong proponents of conversion to Buddhism for its egalitarianism, or to Christianity because of short term material benefits promised by evangelists. But the Guru did not think so; he explicitly said so on occasion, and in particular, his reply to a question by Mahatma Gandhi is recorded as follows:

Gandhi: Has Swamiji come across any injunction in the Hindu scriptures in favor of untouchability?

Guru: None

Gandhi: Has Swamiji any reservations about the Satyagraha against untouchability at Vaikom?

Guru: No, none at all...

Gandhi: Besides removing untouchability, what else should be done to improve the lot of the depressed sections?

Guru: They should get educated. Also they must earn enough for their needs. I don't think inter caste marriage and inter dining are to be done immediately. Give them equal opportunities for betterment, along with everyone else...

Gandhi: ... Is Hinduism helpful enough to gain salvation?

Guru: Of course. Hinduism affords avenues of spiritual freedom. But people hanker after wordly freedom.

Gandhi: That's true as far as disabilities arising from untouchability etc. are concerned. But does Swamiji feel that conversion is a must for religious freedom?

Guru: No. Conversion is not necessary for spiritual freedom.

The Guru's point of view was that it was undesirable to change religions seeking temporary benefits. If one believed sincerely in a religion, he felt no objection to conversion. But without belief, or against belief, if one converted for material benefits, the Guru considered this improper. Here is another conversation between the Guru and one of his disciples¹:

Guru: There should be the freedom to change religion if someone feels the need for it. The father's religion may not be the one for the son. We must have freedom of religion. That is my opinion. There should not be caste anywhere. Men must live as one caste. This opinion should be propagated everywhere. By the way, those who want to convert, what is it that they say are the problems of Hinduism?

Disciple: They say Hindu scriptures are degenerate. They say that Vedas and the Gita advocate animal sacrifice and polytheism and caste.

Guru: Maybe the Veda is like that. Still, there may be great philosophical ideas somewhere in between these things. Even if scriptures are good, there is no guarantee that the practices of those who claim to follow them will be good. So regardless of how the scriptures are, if people are degenerate all is lost. Men must improve. They must be pure in act and word and thought. That is what is needed. Whatever the religion, men must improve themselves. That is my opinion.

¹ See K. Ramachandran, Mahacharitamala, pp 67

There was, at the time, no legal or social sanction against a Hindu converting to some other religion. However, it was next to impossible for someone to convert to Hinduism from some other religion, for they would not be accepted into the ‘upper castes’, and they would naturally be reluctant to be condemned to be a ‘lower caste’ person.

There were a few cases where Ezhavas and Thiyyas who had converted to Christianity desired to return to the fold, but the community would not accept them. The Guru intervened and welcomed them back.

In summary, the SNDP Yogam, which was set up as a religious and cultural organization, spearheaded the movement for propagating the Guru’s message. Unfortunately, the Yogam has for all practical purposes become an Ezhava movement, and as a result, the universal message of the Guru has become seen through the narrow prism of a community organization.

But this is a great disservice to the Guru; and even more of a disservice to the sanatana dharma. For here was a great master, born by chance in an oppressed community. At a time when it is fashionable to suggest that oppressed Hindus should leave the religion forthwith, and that they will be able to advance themselves only through that means, this saintly Guru said the exact opposite. That instead of running away from the challenge, it is possible to reform the religion so that it may once again regain its glory. For a resurgent India, and for Hindus standing at the threshold of redeeming our past greatness, this message is of the utmost importance.

The All Religion Conference and the Later Years

The Guru’s sixtieth birthday, as always a milestone in an Indian life, was celebrated in 1916 CE, on the 27th of Chingam, 1092 ME. As usual, the Guru had forbidden wasteful celebration, insisting on no ceremony at all. The Guru spent the day at the Advaita Ashram. But there were meetings sponsored by the SNDP Yogam at other places.

Reaching the last stage of a man’s life, as traditionally indicated by the attainment of *shashti abda poorthi* or the sixtieth birthday, did not lessen the Guru’s energy or enthusiasm. He often used his birthday to come up with pithy aphorisms. For instance, in ME 1096 or 1920 CE, on his 64th birthday, he made a sweeping indictment of alcohol:

“Liquor is poison; brew it not; vend it not. The toddy tapper’s body stinks, his clothes stink; his house stinks; and whatever he touches stinks.”

The Guru had a perfectly rational explanation for his condemnation of alcohol, which he made despite the fact that some small number of Ezhavas were in the business of tapping and selling toddy. The Guru saw the depredations that alcohol brought upon the household: many men spent their meager earnings on drink, leaving nothing for their families. And on the other hand, the producer, the toddy tapper, made practically no money. The middleman was enriched in the bargain. It is possible that Mahatma Gandhi was influenced by the Guru’s views on alcohol.

A few years later, the Guru desired to conduct an All Religion Conference, where the objective was “not to argue and defeat, but to know and to inform”²: a remarkably forward looking and secular perspective. Of course, the Guru also said, “It doesn’t matter what your religion is, it is enough if man improves. Don’t ask, don’t tell, and don’t think caste.”

The Conference was held at Aluva in ME 1099 or 1924 CE, at the Advaita Ashram. For long, the Guru had held the view that² all religions had the same basis:

“All religions have the same objective. When rivers reach the sea, is there a distinction between a tidal pool and the ocean deeps? Religions merely have the right to encourage men to look upwards at the heavens. If they have that, they will figure out the truth themselves. Religions are just roadsigns on the way to the truth. Someone who has realized the truth does not give any credence to religion. Indeed, for religion, he is credence. Did the Buddha learn Buddhism first to tell us the path to nirvana? No, he sought the path to nirvana, found it and then taught it. Later that became Buddhism. Does the Buddha benefit from Buddhism? If you say the Vedas are divine, it just means that we don’t know the authors of all the Vedic mantras. It might also be that the principles described in the Vedas are divine. This advice is only relevant to those who wish to seek and to gain knowledge. The common man must give credence to the scriptures of the religion that he believes in. It is important for religious leaders to be careful that there is no advice in the scriptures that are against dharma. Even though he gives credence to the Vedas, doesn’t Yogananda Sarasvati decry as artificial the absurdities in the Veda? That is what all religious teachers need to do. Conflicts between nations or communities will end when one defeats the other. However, when religions are in conflict, there is no end to it because one cannot defeat the other. For religious conflict to end, everyone should study every religion with an unbiased mind. Then it will be obvious that in their major principles, they are not so different. That which is thus obvious is the only religion that I recommend.”

The All Religion Conference was the first held in India, and reminds one of the great Conference of Religions in Chicago in 1899 CE, where Swami Vivekananda burst on the scene, bringing to the West a glimpse of the treasures of the East. Justice T Sadasiva Iyer of the Madras High Court presided. Scholars representing different religions and other perspectives.

Satyavrataswami gave a brilliant speech outlining the Guru’s vision for the conference. Arya Samajist Rshi Ram, Swami Sivaprasad of the Brahmo Samaj, and a Buddhist bhikshu from Sri Lanka represented Indic religions. Semitic perspectives came from Islam’s Mohammed Maulvi and Christianity’s K K Kuruvilla. Rationalist/atheist views were represented by C Krishnan and Manjeri Rama Krishna Iyer.

The historic Vaikom Satyagraha took place a few years later, in 1924. For the first time in India, the ‘low castes’ united and rose up against the injustice of casteism in a

² See K. Ramachandran, *Mahacharithamala*, pp 68

determined, non violent manner with a strong moral component. Even though it did not succeed immediately in its objective, the opening up of the roads around the Mahadevar to all Hindus, it was the catalyst that led to Temple Entry later. The Guru gave his full support to the peaceful and disciplined satyagrahis. It was roughly in this time frame that both Tagore (in 1922) and Gandhi (in 1925) visited Sivagiri and met with the Guru.

Over the next few years, the Guru traveled in Sri Lanka and Tamil Nadu extensively. He visited various Buddhist temples in Colombo, Kandy and elsewhere. A conversation with a Buddhist lay person is recorded: he wanted to know what the Guru's religion was.

"I am a Buddhist too", said the Guru.

Seeing that the man was unconvinced, he continued: "You must have heard of the other names of Lord Buddha: Shadabhinja, Dasabala, Advayavadi, Vinayaka. Well, I am an Advayavadi, and that is why I said my religion, too, is Buddhism."

But there is some indication that the Guru's travels were disturbed by factional infighting and other problems at Sivagiri, to the extent that he said that he might prefer to spend the rest of his days in Nuwara Eliya or Tirukonamalai (Trincomalee) in Sri Lanka, or in Tamil Nadu on the banks of the Tamraparni. It appears that the Guru was disappointed at the direction his movement was taking. As is normal in all human institutions, there must have been ego clashes and empire building, losing sight of the big picture. Furthermore, the deaths of Kumaran Asan in 1924 and Satyavrata Swami in 1926, the loss of two of his favorite disciples, may have affected the Guru personally: after all, even as a renunciant, he was human, and he had bonds of great affection for them. Their deaths certainly affected the cogency of the movement.

Perhaps as a result of this, or because of his advancing years (his 70th birthday was celebrated in 1926), the Guru grew more pensive, and began making plans for his succession. In September 1925, he formally anointed Bodhanandaswami as his successor. In order to be clear about his wishes, he drew up his Last Will and Testament, wherein he included instructions for the formation of an order of monks, to which he willed his entire worldly possessions, including monasteries, temples, and all other assets. In 1928, the Sri Narayana Dharma Sangham, an order of monks, was duly set up.

The Guru's desire was that a disciplined order of monks – harking back to the Buddha's original concept of the *sangha* – should be established, which would ultimately help transform society and take it towards the ideal of Rama Rajya.

The last public meeting that the Guru addressed was a special meeting of the Yogam at Kottayam, in 1928. This was a proud moment for the Yogam: it now had 108 branches and a membership of over 50,000, thanks especially to the organizational genius of T K Madhavan. The movement that the Guru had ignited at Aruvippuram had truly become a mass movement, and it continues to this day.

It was at the Nagambadam Temple at Kottayam in the same year that the idea of a pilgrimage to Sivagiri was mooted. Two lay disciples, Vallabhassery Govindan Vaidyar and T K Kittan, approached the Guru with the idea of a pilgrimage for Ezhavas. The conversation gives great insight into the Guru's perspective and practicality (and to his wry sense of humor), so it is included verbatim here:³

Guru: Pilgrimage? To Sivagiri? Interesting. They can bathe in the springs there. Pay their respects to Sarada Devi. Very good, tell me more.

Disciples: We request that the Swami declare Sivagiri as a pilgrim center for Ezhavas of Kerala.

Guru: Well, the Janardhanaswami temple at Varkala, that is already a pilgrim center. Will Sivagiri also become holy?

Disciples: We have no entry to the normal Hindu holy places. If we try to go there, they insult us, make things difficult for us, and we end up spending a lot of money. If you declare it as such, Sivagiri will become holy. The Swami just has to say so.

Guru: So if I declare it as such, Sivagiri will become holy. You truly believe this?

Disciples: We have no doubt about it, Sire.

Guru: Let's see: I say it is holy and the two of you believe it. That makes three of us. Is that enough?

Disciples: If the Swami declares it as such, two million Ezhavas and all the other depressed communities would recognize Sivagiri as a place of pilgrimage.

Guru: Such faith you have! Very good, I concur.

Disciples: It is desired that it be an annual pilgrimage. Please advise us as to the month, date, week, and star.

Guru: Let them come to Sivagiri at the time of the Europeans' new year. January 1st. By our reckoning, that is roughly 16th or 17th in the month of Dhanu (Sagittarius). That's a good time.

Disciples: What vows and penances must the pilgrims observe?

Guru: People find it difficult these days to observe long and difficult penances. Many may not. Let them observe for ten days the Five Purities of Sri Buddha.

Disciples: Should there any special clothing they should wear?

³ See K. Ramachandran, *ibid.*, pp 77

Guru: White is for the householder; saffron for monks; black clothes for Sabarimala pilgrims. Let it be yellow for Sivagiri: the colors of Sri Krishna and Sri Buddha. That would be good.

Disciples: Should pilgrims wear rudraksha beads?

Guru: No, Let but they can grind the beads up in a little water and drink it. That may do them some good. Any other queries?

Disciples: Nothing more

Guru: Do you know the Five Purities of Sri Buddha?

Disciples: Yes, we do.

Guru: Tell me what they are.

Disciples: Body purity, food purity, purity in mind, purity in speech, purity in action

Guru: Yes, it will be enough to observe these. Besides, just because I said yellow clothes nobody should go out and buy yellow silk. It is not even necessary to have new clothes. They can just use their normal white clothes, and dip them in turmeric water. Later when they wash them they will become white again. The pilgrimage must be without any pomp. Humble. Chant the praises of God. Do not defeat the purpose of the pilgrimage through pomp and circumstance and noise. Do not spend a penny unnecessarily. You must learn to save. The community is backward in education and wealth and cleanliness. This has to change; it has to be changed. Do you have any more questions?

Disciples: None

Guru: What is the objective of this pilgrimage? Is there any?

Disciples: But you told us the objectives.

Guru: Those were the mechanisms. Are the objectives the same as the mechanisms?

There was no response.

Guru: Once a year a bunch of people from various parts of the country travel to Sivagiri wearing yellow clothes. They walk around, bathe, eat, spend money, and then go home. What do they accomplish by all this? Nothing. Just spent money

and time. This is not proper. Every act should have a purpose. Take the following notes:

The objectives of the Sivagiri pilgrimage are the following:

1. Education
2. Cleanliness
3. Devotion
4. Organization
5. Agriculture
6. Trade
7. Handicrafts
8. Technical training

There should be a series of talks about these topics. Invite experts in these fields and ask them to speak. People should listen carefully and pay attention. They should then try to put these into practice. They should succeed in that. Then the people and the land will advance. Not only Ezhavas, but through Ezhavas others will also progress. Thus life can be made worthwhile. This is the main aim of the Sivagiri pilgrimage.

Today, at the end of December, you see large groups of yellow clad pilgrims traveling, usually on foot, to Sivagiri. These are the salt of the earth, the peasants: poor, dark skinned, undernourished people, the underprivileged of Kerala, still struggling one hundred years after the founding of the SNDP Yogam. The fact that they still believe is a testament to the enduring revolution started by the Guru. The fact that they are still poor and down trodden is a testimony to the fact that there are still miles to go.

It was after the Kottayam meeting when we was resting at the Vellur ashram that the Guru felt acute trouble from the illness that was to finally bring this remarkable life to an end. The problem was a prostate trouble, and the symptoms were severe pain and difficulty in passing urine. Rest at the Aluva ashram did not seem to improve things, so he went to Palghat, and later to Chennai, to seek the advice of various doctors. Nothing seemed to work, so he returned to Sivagiri to begin ayurvedic treatment. Even though the illness did not subside, he felt better.

Some of his disciples were astonished: why couldn't the Swami cure himself? Wasn't he a miracle worker? After all, myths about his powers had spread far and wide. But the Guru lived and died like all mortals, suffering, almost in a Buddhist sense of the *samsara sagaram*.

The Guru's seventy second birthday arrived, and there was no celebration. His condition continued to worsen, and it reached a stage where he needed help to move. Yet, his calm and his witty speech remained. The Guru knew that his end was near, and he prepared himself mentally to leave this realm: he said his goodbyes to disciples and friends, and made arrangements to settle all his affairs.

On the 5th of Kanni (Virgo), 1104 ME or September 20th 1928, a rainy day, the Guru said, “I feel at peace”. His visage cleared, and so did the clouds, in the afternoon. He asked that his own creation, *Daivadasakam*, (Ten Verses to God), be chanted. Listening to the last stanza:

Into the sea of Thy Glory profound
Let us all plunge,
And flourish ever,
Flourish, in happiness flourish.

the Guru attained samadhi at 3pm. The *avatara purusha*, the man of the ages, was no more.

Sri Narayana’s Thought Today

The Aruvippuram consecration took place in 1888 CE; the establishment of the SNDP Yogam in 1903 CE. Today, after one hundred years of the efforts of the Yogam, it is instructive to wonder what the Guru’s impact has been.

It is clear that in some ways, the Guru’s impact has been electric; in other ways, there is a sense of disappointment. For instance, in the plus category must lie the immense shift in perspective of society, nowhere more evident than in the palpable self-image of ‘lower-caste’ Hindus in Kerala. They have that most valuable commodity now: dignity. In this sense, the Guru’s work has been almost miraculous and it is cause for optimism.

A few years ago, one of us interviewed the Sankaracharya of Kanchi, Srimad Jayendra Sarasvatigal, surely one of the foremost living authorities on Hinduism. During the conversation, we asked him how some place like Bihar which suffers greatly from caste-related problems could improve itself. The Seer’s response was: “A great man like Sri Narayana Guru will have to be born there”.

On another occasion, when a brief review of Dr. K Sreenivasan’s biography of the Guru was published in the American magazine *Hinduism Today*, we received a surprising letter from a black American man in prison. He said that he wished he had heard of the Guru’s message of self-respect and self-improvement when he was a young man. If he had, his life would not degenerated into a downward, self-destructive spiral, and he might have been a respectable citizen, not a criminal.

These anecdotes show how the universality of the Guru’s messages, both in their simple, practical form as well as in their deep, philosophical form, appeals across the spectrum. This is the greatest achievement of the Guru: he was able to turn the complex philosophies of Advaita into something that is easily grasped by us lay people: in this, he was following in the footsteps of the great Bhakti saints like Manikkavachakar and Meerabai who brought Hinduism to the masses through their ecstatic love of God.

On the other hand, the disappointment comes from several perspectives: one is that the Guru’s message has not received the attention it merits; the second is that the upliftment

of the oppressed has not been as thoroughgoing as one would wish; the third is that the very organizations that the Guru created have gone through their own evolution, not necessarily in ways that the Guru would have approved.

Despite the fact that the Guru's message is crystal-clear and simple, as well as universally applicable, it has not received the attention that it deserves. Especially in today's general Indian environment that focuses on entitlements and rights of citizens, the idea that you have a responsibility in return is quite important. That responsibility is to yourself and to your nation: as US President John Kennedy, once said, "Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country".

The same applies to each individual: our duty is not ask what we can get for ourselves through collective bargaining or manipulating the system, but to ask what we can do for others, in the spirit of selfless service. In the process, each of us has to strive to be the best we can be, to make use of our God given talents to the fullest. Unfortunately, there is a great competition in India for comparative victimhood. Everyone wants to be seen as a victim, and the greatest victims can demand the greatest recompense.

Nevertheless, it is true that the plight of the average citizen has not improved as much as one would have hoped after fifty years of self rule. Once the rapacious colonialists departed, it was hoped, India would revert to the kind of self-governing, benign republic that thrived, for example at Chingleput in Tamil Nadu had centuries ago. This has not happened, and the numbers of poor, underprivileged, undernourished Ezhavas who go, yellow-clad, on the Sivagiri pilgrimage, is itself a signal that the revolution remains incomplete.

A particularly distressing fact is that Kerala, despite all its soothing external appearances of being egalitarian and free of overt casteism, is in fact a cauldron of seething covert casteism and communalism. The fellow feeling is superficial, but deep down the old divides between religions and between castes are still strong, and if fact are getting stronger by the day because of the obvious benefits of collective bargaining based on one's group identity. Because the economic pie has not grown very much greater in Kerala, it has been important for everyone to try and grab a bigger share.

There are three organizations that have different roles to play in propagating the Guru's thoughts:

- The SNDP Yogam
- The Sivagiri Matam Sannyasi Sangham
- The Sri Narayana Gurukulam

Just as the organizations founded by the Buddha deteriorated after his death – they even started deifying the Buddha who had expressly denied the very existence of God – so have the Guru's own creations not quite turned out the way he would have wanted them to proceed.

Despite the fact that the Yogam was intended to be a universal brotherhood, in effect it has become a lobbying group for Ezhavas. The Ezhavas have not been an effective vote bank, because they have by and large supported the Marxist party, without trying to be a swing vote capable of extracting concessions from the major political parties. The SNDP Yogam is now on a trajectory of positioning itself as the unquestioned votebank of the Ezhavas, in the pursuit of which it has even created a political party. With economic liberalization the new mantra, and the Marxists losing their appeal, the Ezhava vote is up for grabs, and it is possible that right-wing Hindu sentiments will appeal most to them in today's dispensation.

The Sannyasi Sangham was intended to be a monastic order on the lines of the Buddhist sangha: an order of renunciant monks living according to the precepts of the Guru's poem *Asramam*. Unfortunately, the order has become preoccupied with more worldly matters, such as managing the land and temples under its control. It has also begun to indulge in politics, and factional in-fighting there has worsened to such an extent that there have been shameful incidents: court ordered change of leadership, and alarmingly, a police attack on the Sivagiri shrine itself.

The Gurukulam has kept aloof from worldly matters, and has concentrated on the philosophy of the Guru. Under the able guidance of Nataraja Guru, the Sorbonne-educated and urbane son on Dr. Palpu, the East-West Center for Brahmavidya at Sivagiri became a showpiece of the Gurukulams's work on propagating the Guru's word in the realm of philosophy.

Is this a sufficient legacy for one who was a man of the ages, a yugu-purusha? As Swami Dharmateerth suggests:

“Sri Narayana Guru occupies a distinct place in the history of Hindu culture and the successive attempts made by great teachers to consolidate the people of India into a united nation... The Buddha made us one in Righteousness; Sri Sankara made us one in the Spirit and Truth; Sri Narayana Guru seeks to make us one in the living brotherhood of a free nation...”

And further:

“He created a revolution before anybody knew its exact nature or consequences, without antagonizing anyone or demolishing any doctrine or attacking any sect or creed. No other great teacher ever accomplished his mission so peacefully.”

The Guru, this gentle revolutionary deserves a greater legacy. His vision was to turn India into a nation of self-confident human beings with dignity. There is much left to be done to get there. But when India finally bestrides the world scene like a colossus, regaining its lost economic and cultural dominance of ages past, the gentle and wry, but steely and determined, Sri Narayana Guru Swami will be remembered as one of the architects of the revolution that turned a nation of slaves into a nation of men.

Appendix: Chronology of Events

| Year, CE ⁴ | Year, ME | Event |
|-----------------------|----------|--|
| 1856 | 1032 | Born on August 20 th or Chathayam in Chingam, at Chempazhanthi |
| 1872 | | Completed early education |
| 1876 to 79 | | Pursued higher studies in Sanskrit at Varanapalli |
| 1879 to 84 | | Teaching at various places |
| 1881 | | Named “Nanu Asan” by the people |
| 1882 | | Marriage |
| 1884 | 1032 | Death of father, left home to lead an itinerant life |
| 1888 | | Consecrated pratishta of Siva at Aruvippuram |
| 1891 | | Met Kumaran Asan |
| 1894 | | Inducted Kumaran Asan into ashram and sent him to Dr. Palpu in Bangalore for further studies |
| 1897 | | Wrote Atmopadesa satakam, One Hundred Verses of Self Instruction, an original Vedanta text, at Aruvippuram |
| 1898 | | Created Aruvippuram Temple Committee |
| 1903 | | Created SNDP Yogam |
| 1904 | | Settled at Sivagiri, Varkala |
| 1908 | | Consecrated Jagannatha Temple at Thalasseri |
| 1910 | | Consecrated temples in Kozhikode and Mangalore |
| 1912 | | Consecrated Sarada temple at Sivagiri |
| 1913 | | Established Advaita Ashram, Aluva |
| 1916 | | Wrote Darsanamala in Sanskrit: reinterpreting Hindu philosophy |
| 1921 | | Consecrated a lamp as the deity at Murukkumpuzha; Conference on Brotherhood at Aluva |
| 1922 | | Visited by Rabindranath Tagore at Sivagiri |
| 1924 | | All Religion Conference at Aluva |
| 1925 | | Visited by Mahatma Gandhi at Sivagiri |
| 1927 | | Consecrated a mirror at Kulavancode |
| 1928 | | Entered samadhi at Varkala on September 20 th |

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⁴ CE: Common Era, ME: Malabar Era